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ABSTRACT

This report on sexual assault was written for adolescents. It contains data on teenage sexual assault from the National Youth Survey (NYS), a survey of a nationally representative sample of approximately 1,700 youths who were between 11 and 17 years old at the time of the project's initial interview and who were interviewed annually for 5 years (1976-1980). The data in this report came from the final 3 years of the NYS when detailed information about sexual assaults was obtained from all the self-identified victims and offenders. The research study is briefly described and then findings from the study are used to answer some of the most common questions teenagers ask about sexual assault: (1) what is sexual assault; (2) who is most likely to be sexually assaulted; (3) who is most likely to commit a sexual assault; (4) how often does sexual assault happen; (5) how many teenagers are sexually assaulted; (6) is there a typical sexual assault; (7) what causes a sexual assault; (8) what happens after a sexual assault; (9) what can teenagers do to prevent a sexual assault; and (10) what should you do if you are sexually assaulted. Advice for girls and for boys is given on how to prevent a sexual assault. (NB)

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Public Health Service

Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration

FACTS ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT

From the ncpcr National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape

A Research Report for Teenagers

By
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ACCORDING TO THE TEENAGERS IN OUR SURVEY--

- The typical teenage sexual assault is committed by a boyfriend or acquaintance and occurs during a date.
- Most assaults among teenagers do not involve severe physical violence or the use of a weapon.
- The kind of force typically used is verbal pressure.
- Most victims are able to prevent an assault from being completed.
- Often, drinking or drug use by the offender plays a part in causing the assault.
- Although most teenage victims do not have prolonged emotional reactions to sexual assaults, some express fears, depression, and anger years after the experience.

YOU CAN HELP TO PREVENT SEXUAL ASSAULT BY REMEMBERING--AND FOLLOWING-- TWO SIMPLE GUIDELINES--

- Everyone has the right to say "no" to unwanted sexual contact.
- No one has the right to force sexual contact on another person.

Introduction

People don't like to talk about rape and sexual assault. Many are embarrassed and uncomfortable discussing such things, and others who have been victims often feel too guilty, ashamed, or frightened. Consequently, most of us don't know much about sexual assault and may unknowingly place ourselves in situations in which a sexual assault could happen. In order to learn more about sexual assault among teenagers, the research described in this report was conducted. This report was written with you and other teenagers in mind. Its purpose is to provide you with information that may help you to better understand and avoid sexual assault.

You may be interested in knowing how we gathered the information presented in this report. We began our study in 1978 by interviewing more than 1,700 teenagers all over the United States. These teenagers were selected so as to be representative of all teens who live in America. We asked them to tell us about their lives, including their involvement with their families, friends, schools, and work. In addition, we asked them about their own behavior and experiences—for example, whether they had ever engaged in delinquent behavior, such as theft or sexual assault, and whether they had ever been robbed or sexually assaulted. Because the group we interviewed was typical of all teenagers in the United States the results of the study reflect common teenage experiences and attitudes, including those related to sexual assault.

We interviewed these teenagers once each year for 3 years (1978 through 1980). By interviewing the same teenagers several times, we learned about changes in their lives, attitudes, and behavior that might have affected their chances of becoming victims of sexual assault or of sexually assaulting someone else. For those who had been sexually assaulted, we were able to learn how that experience influenced their lives for several years afterwards.

It is important that you understand what we mean by "victim" and "offender" in this report. Because the most typical teenage victim of sexual assault is a female, we will talk only about female victims. When we discuss

offenders we will be talking only about males since they are the most common offenders.

The term "sexual assault" covers a broad range of forced sexual behavior. When we discuss victims of sexual assault, we are talking about a group who have had a variety of forced sexual experiences. Some were raped, whereas others were forced to engage in other sexual acts. Still others avoided the assaults and thus are technically victims of attempted assaults. No one act or situation is common to all the teenage victims in our study, but the victims share the experience of an attempted or completed sexual assault that they reported during one of our interviews.

The male offenders in our study also reported a variety of experiences. Some completed the sexual assaults they began, whereas others did not. Some were extremely violent in the assaults, but others used less physical forms of pressure on the victims. As with the group of victims, no single experience is common to the group of offenders.

Because most of the assaults reported to us involved acquaintances and boyfriends, and occurred during dates, this report focuses on this type of assault and what you can do to help prevent it. But it is important for you to know that teenagers can also be the victims of sexual assaults by strangers and family members. These assaults are often very painful to the victims emotionally as well as physically, and the victims need the understanding and support of family and friends.

Now that you know something about the study and how the information was gathered and organized, we would like to use the study's findings to answer some of the most common questions teenagers ask about sexual assault. If we don't discuss something you are especially interested in, you may want to look at the references listed at the end of this report. They offer additional information you may find helpful.

What is Sexual Assault?

Any effort to force you, against your will, into sexual intercourse or other sexual acts may be considered a sexual assault. Even though it involves a sexual act, sexual assault is not an act of love. It is an act of aggression, anger, and often violence. There is no one type of sexual assault. It may be a violent attack by a stranger or, more typically, pressure from a date or boyfriend to do more sexually than you want to do. Being forced to engage in sexual acts is sexual assault, even if you know the person who is pressuring you.

Who is Most Likely to be Sexually Assaulted?

Though females are clearly more vulnerable to sexual assault than males, some other personal characteristics do not seem to affect the likelihood of being sexually assaulted. In fact, the color of your skin and your social class have little to do with your risk of being sexually assaulted. Similar proportions of female teenagers from different races and social classes reported sexual assaults. Where you live does affect your risk, however: Urban teenagers are more likely to be sexually assaulted than those who live in suburban or rural areas.

More important, however, the way you act and the friends you have can influence your chances of being sexually assaulted. The teenage victims in our national survey were much more likely to be involved in delinquent activities (such as fighting) and to have gotten into trouble because of their drinking and drug use than were the teenagers who were not sexually assaulted. Not surprisingly, the victims' friends also were delinquent and generally approved of delinquent behavior. These factors suggest that the victims' behavior, friends, and attitudes may have encouraged sexual assaults. Engaging in delinquent behavior and having delinquent friends may give others the impression that you are sexually available as well.

These findings do not mean that only those teenagers who are delinquent will be sexually assaulted or that all victims are delinquent. The findings do show, however,

that the risk of a sexual assault is greater among those whose behavior, attitudes, and friends are delinquent.

Who is Most Likely to Commit a Sexual Assault?

Although it is possible for females to commit sexual assault, almost all offenders are male. Similar proportions of youths from very different backgrounds and places reported committing sexual assaults. The results from our study indicate that such factors as skin color and parents' income and education are not good indicators of who will commit a sexual assault.

However, we did discover that teenage offenders are different from their nonoffending peers in several important ways. The offenders do not have as strong an attachment to their families as do the nonoffenders, and their families have had many more crises, such as divorce and prolonged unemployment. More telling, however, are the differences between the offenders and nonoffenders with regard to their behavior and friends. Offenders are involved in a great deal of delinquent behavior (other than sexual assault), as are their friends. Further, these friends seem to encourage and approve of such behavior, including sexually aggressive acts.

How Often Does Sexual Assault Happen?

No one knows for sure how many sexual assaults occur because so many go unreported. However, the reports from the teenagers in our survey indicate that more than 1 million sexual assaults happen to teenagers each year. Because many teenagers may never tell anyone about their sexual assaults, the actual number is probably much higher.

How Many Teenagers Are Sexually Assaulted?

In each of the years we asked teenagers about this, from 7 to 9 percent of the females reported that they had been sexually assaulted. The actual number of female

victims in the United States is approximately 1 million in each year. The number of victims is slightly less than the number of sexual assaults because some victims experience more than one sexual assault in the same year. In fact, more than one-third of the victims in each year reported more than one sexual assault. Apparently, once a teenager has been sexually assaulted, her chances of being assaulted again increase. Why is this so? Probably it is because of her activities, friends, and lifestyle. If victims tend to be more delinquent than nonvictims and they remain so after they are sexually assaulted, they continue to be in places and doing things that may encourage more sexual assaults.

Is There a Typical Sexual Assault?

Although each sexual assault is different, there are some features common to most teenage sexual assaults. Teenagers are typically assaulted by boyfriends or acquaintances while they are on dates. There is usually only one offender, and he is close in age to the victim. Common settings for these assaults are the victims' and offenders' homes and automobiles. In most cases, the offender attempts to persuade his date to have sex with him. Failing in this approach, he may resort to slapping and physical roughness, but most teenage assaults do not involve severe physical violence or the use of a weapon. In a large number of cases, drinking or drug use by the offender plays a part in causing the assault. In addition, actions and gestures of the victim may lead her date to believe that she would be willing to have sexual relations. Most of the victims in our survey offered both verbal and physical resistance and were able to prevent the assaults from being completed.

What Causes a Sexual Assault?

There is no one correct answer to this question. Many factors often combine to cause a sexual assault. The personal characteristics and behavior of the victim and the offender, the setting in which the assault occurred, and the use of drugs and liquor are commonly cited as possible

causes. To learn about the factors the offenders and victims in our study thought were relevant, we asked them to respond to a list of factors that could have caused their sexual assaults. The factors ranged from characteristics and behavior of the offender and victim to the time of day or location of the assault.

It did not surprise us to learn that the female victims and male offenders often differed in their beliefs about what began the sexual assaults. A majority of the female victims in all years listed the time of day and the fact that the offender was sexually excited as important factors. A large proportion also said that the location of the assault and the fact that the offender was drunk or high on drugs were contributing factors. Less than one-quarter of the victims in any year thought that their behavior, dress, or physical appearance was influential in causing the sexual assault. Thus, according to the victims, such things as location, time of day, and the offenders' behavior were the major causes of sexual assaults.

In contrast, a large proportion of the offenders said that the victim's physical build and her teasing and flirting led to the sexual assault. In contrast to the victims, who accepted little responsibility for their sexual assaults, a sizable proportion of the offenders in 2 of the 3 years said that their sexual excitement was a contributing factor. According to the offenders, a combination of their behavior and that of their victims was responsible for the sexual assaults.

These findings show that male and female teenagers see different factors as important in causing sexual assaults. This situation makes it possible for actions and behavior to be misinterpreted by one person or the other. Flirtatious behavior by females, however innocent, may be interpreted as an invitation for sex, especially by males who are drunk or high on drugs. This fact does not mean that females should never flirt or show that they like someone. It does mean, however, that they need to think about the situations they are in and the effect their actions may have on their dates or others. If a female does not wish to be intimate with someone, her words and actions should communicate her wishes clearly, firmly, and before the situation gets out of hand. Males, for their part, must not assume that all flirtatious behavior implies a desire for

sex. A date may wish to show her affection without having sexual intercourse. Males should respect their dates' right to set their own sexual limits.

What Happens After a Sexual Assault?

Most of the victims we interviewed did not report their assaults to the police, nor did they tell their parents. Failure to report these assaults seems to be related to the victims' beliefs that attempted sexual assaults by dates or friends are not real sexual assaults. When asked why they didn't report to the police, many victims said that no harm had been done and that they didn't want to report the offenders because they knew them. A majority of the victims did tell their friends about the assaults, however, and in most instances these friends were supportive and concerned.

Many victims, immediately after being assaulted, felt angry, depressed, embarrassed, and guilty. More than 50 percent of the victims expressed these feelings. A smaller but still sizable proportion of victims reported that they were fearful of being alone and fearful that the offender would return. Very few victims were physically hurt or injured.

A year after the assault, a much smaller proportion of victims reported still feeling any of these emotions or fears. Based on these results, teenage victims of attempted "date rapes" do not appear to experience prolonged negative reactions to their assaults. Nonetheless, a 3-year follow-up study of a group of victims did show that many of them were more fearful of being alone 3 years after the sexual assault than immediately after it occurred. Although it is fair to say that most teenage victims of sexual assault are not likely to experience prolonged reactions, a small proportion may express fears, depression, and anger for many years after a sexual assault.

What Can You Do To Prevent a Sexual Assault?

Being aware of the influence of society's attitudes and values on sexual behavior is one way to prevent sexual assaults. We live in a society that "hypes" sex and violence and, in many ways, encourages sexual assault. Movies, rock videos, TV shows, and books and magazines present the ideal male as sexually active and dominant and the ideal female as flirtatious and alluring. The male most often has his way sexually with the woman, even if she is somewhat resistant at first. The image is of male dominance and female submission. Most of these media images project the message that sex appeal is important and sexual aggression is part of the game.

Several things are misleading and unrealistic in the media's portrayal. In the romantic images on the screen, both the male and female want and enjoy the sexual encounter. Though the female may be somewhat coy and play "hard to get," she enjoys the pursuit and conquest. In the media, rarely is one of the partners unwilling to participate and forced to do so. Yet in reality, this often happens. Sexual encounters are not all sweet music, soft lights, and a loving, mutually consenting couple.

The sexual images in the media are misleading also because they define men and women primarily in sexual terms. The males are sexually aggressive and predatory toward women, and these traits are seen as part of "being a real man." The implication is that a man who is not dominant sexually is somehow less masculine. Respecting the rights and feelings of others, whether on sexual or other matters, is not a masculine trait in the media.

The media depict females as sexual objects, always interested in and available for sexual adventures. The media's images tell females that first and foremost they are to be sexually appealing and available. These messages encourage and promote sexual encounters in which the male is dominant and the female passive, or at least not resistant. Such limited images of males and females help to set the stage for sexual violence.

Finally, the amount of time and attention devoted to sex and sexuality on TV and in the movies suggests that sex

is, or should be, the dominant concern in your life. This heavy sexual emphasis places pressure on you to become sexually active or to be more active than you are. Despite the media hype, there are many teenagers who have never had sex and many others who have it only occasionally. You need not feel pressured into having sex with someone just to conform to a popular but incorrect image that "everyone is doing it."

The attitudes and images of the society in which we live influence all of us. Yet we need to think about the effect of these values on our sexual behavior and the way we interact with others. One way to do this is to focus on our actions when we are in settings where sex is most likely. The following pages talk specifically about your behavior on dates and in other social situations and also discuss general ways in which you can prevent a sexual assault. The comments will be directed first to females and then to males.

a. Advice to Females

The fact that most teenage sexual assaults occur on dates and are not violent is contrary to a general belief that sexual assaults involve strangers and physical violence. Yet knowing these facts may make you more aware of the potential for sexual assault in your own life. You are more likely to be sexually assaulted by a friend or date than by a stranger. Recognizing this, you should think about how you act on dates and how your words and actions may carry unintended sexual messages. For example, getting drunk or high on drugs may communicate a certain image about the kind of person you are and certainly makes you vulnerable to the sexual advances of others. Losing control of your own behavior jeopardizes your ability to avoid a sexual assault.

You need to think also about how the behavior of your date communicates his interests and desires, and how you have reacted (or would react) if pressured for sex. If your date is pressing his affections on you or becoming more intimate than you want, you need to react firmly and quickly to these sexual advances. A weak or delayed response may be too little too late. There is no way to prevent a sexual assault, but there are some things you can do, especially on dates, to reduce the chance of becoming a victim:

- Check your own behavior for any unintentional sexual messages.
- Be alert to any sexual cues from your date or others.
- Clearly communicate your sexual limits.
- React immediately and negatively to unwanted sexual pressure.

Even if you do not give clear messages, however, no one has the right to take advantage of you sexually. Thus, although it is important to understand how your behavior can lead to a sexual assault, it is also important not to assume the responsibility for being sexually assaulted. Miscommunication and bad judgment on your part do not warrant or justify a sexual assault.

To avoid becoming a victim, you also need to understand which teenage males are most likely to commit sexual assaults. From the information we have presented, you know that the offenders were much more likely to be delinquent and to have delinquent friends than the males who did not commit sexual assaults. Thus, dating someone who is known for his wild friends, illegal behavior, and sexual aggression is asking for trouble.

Using common sense in selecting your dates and following the guidelines just listed will help you avoid becoming a victim. But if a friend or date pressures you for sex, remember that most teenage males will not become violent or continue their attempts if you are firm in your refusal. You have the right and responsibility to control your body and sexual behavior. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to say no and to back up your words with action.

Finally, it is important to stress that other people form impressions of you by observing your behavior, attitudes, and friends. You can reduce the likelihood of a sexual assault by not presenting an image that suggests you might be willing to have sex.

b. Advice to Males

Though teenage females need to monitor and control their behavior so as to reduce the risk of sexual assault, the primary burden of preventing sexual assaults falls on teenage males. In most instances, it is your actions and behavior that will determine whether a sexual assault occurs. Let's talk about how you can avoid committing a sexual assault.

You have a difficult role to play; you are expected to initiate sexual behavior but not to force yourself on your partner. In playing this role, you need to interpret the sexual cues and signals of your date or partner and then decide how to proceed. Miscommunication may occur since it is likely that both of you want to appear sexually attractive, yet may not agree on how far you want to go. It is critical that you respect the right of your date or partner to set her own sexual limits. Flirtatious or sexually encouraging behavior does not always indicate a willingness to engage in sexual intercourse. Even if your date's behavior has clearly indicated to you her desire for sex, she has the right to change her mind, just as you do. Although it may be unfair and potentially dangerous for females to appear sexually available and then change their minds, such behavior does not warrant a sexual assault. Misinterpreted or inconsistent sexual signals do not justify sexual aggression.

The influence of friends is an important factor in committing sexual assaults. Our research showed that the friends of offenders approved of sexually aggressive behavior much more than the friends of nonoffenders. This finding suggests that your friends may encourage sexually assaultive behavior. Though "scoring" sexually may be seen by your friends as appropriate masculine behavior, it isn't. Forcing someone to have sex with you is an aggressive, sometimes violent act. All it signifies is your loss of control and your willingness to use your power and strength to subdue someone else. It is a strength, not a weakness, to respect someone else's wishes, whether in sexual or other matters. Friends who encourage sexually aggressive behavior are really expressing their lack of concern or caring for others. You can help prevent sexual assaults by respecting the right of a female to say no to your sexual advances and encouraging your friends to do the same.

Preventing sexual assaults requires that you follow a few basic guidelines:

- Don't assume that any flirtatious behavior is a signal for sex.
- Always respect the right of your date or partner to set her own sexual limits.
- Discourage your friends from sexually aggressive behavior.

If you follow these guidelines, it is unlikely that you will ever commit a sexual assault or encourage your friends to do so.

The preceding advice to both males and females can be summed up in two simple reminders:

- Everyone has the right to say "no" to unwanted sexual contact.
- No one has the right to force sexual contact on another person.

By remembering--and following--this advice, and by encouraging your friends to do the same, you can do your part toward preventing sexual assault.

What Should You Do If You Are Sexually Assaulted?

Because there are so many different kinds of sexual assaults, there is no single answer to this question. The nature and seriousness of the assault (or attempt) as well as your feelings and reactions will determine your actions. If the sexual assault was not completed and you were not physically injured, you may simply want to discuss the incident with your friends and take no further action. However, if the sexual assault was traumatic for any reason, and especially if it was completed, you should seriously consider taking the following steps.

First, seek help from someone you know will both support and comfort you. This may be a friend, parent, or other relative. One of the best ways you can recover emotionally from a sexual assault is to talk out your feelings. Pretending the assault didn't happen and keeping your feelings bottled up inside may increase the tension and anxiety you may already feel. If you are not comfortable talking with people who know you, go to a rape crisis center or other counseling center where there are people trained to help you. These centers are often listed under the word "Rape" in the phone book.

You may have strong emotional and psychological reactions to your experience. Many teenagers in our survey had such reactions, even to attempted sexual assaults. Also, many of these emotional reactions continued for some time after the sexual assault. Knowing that other teenage victims also have strong emotional reactions such as embarrassment, guilt, anger, and fear should help you to view your own reactions as typical and normal. It is very common and understandable for victims to react in these ways.

Remember, most victims of sexual assault have some emotional reaction to their experience. Although for some this reaction is only minor and short term, for others it is strong and long lasting. Though we cannot predict what kind of reaction you would have to a sexual assault, we do know that sharing your feelings with others can help you to deal with the experience you have had and to feel better about yourself.

Second, if you were injured, you should get prompt medical treatment. Hospital emergency rooms are the best and most available source of treatment, although depending on the time of day, you may wish to see your own physician or seek a more anonymous source of treatment, such as a Planned Parenthood or public health department clinic. Seeking immediate medical treatment is important for your own health, but it also is critical if you plan to report the sexual assault to the police. Medical evidence gathered from victims of sexual assault is important legal evidence to be used in prosecuting offenders. You may find it helpful to talk with someone from the rape crisis center nearest you about the laws and evidence

requirements in your locality. A rape crisis counselor will probably also be able to tell you what to expect if you report the assault and what victim services are available in your area.

Even if you were not noticeably injured and do not want to report the incident to the police, you may still want to seek prompt medical treatment. A general physical checkup can assure you that you are all right. Furthermore, the doctor can explain physical reactions to the sexual assault that may occur later on. Knowing about these possible physical reactions will ease your mind if they do appear. Finally, you may wish to be checked for venereal disease, and at a later date for pregnancy.

Third, you may want to report your sexual assault to the police. Deciding whether to do this is difficult, but you should make this decision as soon after the incident as possible. To delay in reporting may hinder the prosecution of the case. Many factors may affect your decision, such as whether you knew or were intimidated by the offender, whether the assault was completed, and how you feel about making your experience public and possibly having to testify in court. Remember that an attempted sexual assault by a date or friend is a crime, and may be reported to the police. You need to consider all the factors, seek advice from family and friends, if you wish, and then make up your own mind about whether to report the assault. It is important that you understand that there is no one right decision. In the end it is your decision and you should be comfortable with it.

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